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The Latest News

Land Surveyors' "Bible" Gets Update

The Manual of Instructions for the Survey of the Public Lands of the United States, one of the "Surveyors' Bibles," will be receiving a facelift over the next few years. The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) has begun developing the next edition in order to incorporate changes in statute and case law that have occurred over the last 30 years. The current edition, published in 1973, is becoming outdated.



The Manual describes how cadastral surveys of the public lands are completed in conformance to statutory law. The earliest rules governing the survey of the public lands were issued in manuscript and in printed circulars in 1785. This new version of the Manual is mainly intended to balance the printed instructions with current legislation, judicial and administrative decisions, and current surveying practice. The impetus for this update, according to Robert Dahl, BLM cadastral surveyor and point-person for this project, was a steady stream of feedback from cadastral surveyors in the field, attorneys and title insurance workers asking, "When is the BLM going to update the Manual?"

The impact of this book crosses many fields and disciplines; its relevance is not solely to the government surveyor. The targeted audience of the Manual is the surveyor who works with the Public Land Survey System (PLSS). And since 30 western states were originally surveyed using this system, it impacts a large percentage of surveyors in the United States, those in private practice, as well as those who work for the federal government. Dahl said that the "BLM cannot tell the private land surveyor how to survey, however, if the land surveyor goes out to survey land that was originally surveyed using the Public Land Survey System, even if the client is a private land owner, the Manual gives instruction on how to protect the private rights of that land owner." Dahl points out that it is important not to confuse the status of the land or who owns it with the way the land was originally surveyed. Land built on the PLSS may be privately held today but the principles in the Manual may still apply.

The Manual is also used by attorneys, as well as title insurance company personnel and real estate agents, all of whom need to have a working knowledge of the laws that govern property rights.

Accordingly, this new edition will include a discussion of the law and policies of surveying and boundaries as they have developed since the last edition of 1973. "Land surveyors are the first line of protection for private property rights," said Don Buhler, chief cadastral surveyor for the BLM. "Surveys must be legally correct, therefore the Manual is issued to guide land surveyors who exercise a technical responsibility in the execution of cadastral surveys or resurveys."

Dahl said that one of the preliminary operating premises for the next addition of the Manual is that it will not be technology dependent. Today there is no need for the Manual to have a great deal of technical discussion, due to the large amount of technology-related material that is already in print. The meat of the new edition will be the case law and resurvey principles.

For surveyors that are apprehensive about the update, most of the Manual will not change. One

thing that won't change is the core of the Manual—the origin and history of the PLSS and the law. The 1973 Manual contains much of the same language as the 1930 Manual, and the new one is expected to be very similar to the 1973 version. Even the chapter headings and subheads are expected to remain the same; the changes will most likely only become evident once one reads deeper into it.

Although it is still very early in the process, Dahl foresees the most revisions being implemented to chapter seven of the Manual, Special Surveys, and specifically the section on water boundaries in order to bring it up to date with post-1973 federal court cases.

By the spring of 2003 the plan and process for the next edition of the Manual should be available for presentations. All interested parties will have ample time to comment. Prior to the comment period, editors will focus on the preliminary development of the content of the next edition. Buhler has final approval of the manual update, which is hoped to be completed in 2005.

“This Manual is about protecting property rights,” Dahl said. “We don’t want to write a new book on how to survey; we simply want to give solid instructions so that a judge will be able to say to a surveyor, ‘Yes, you protected that client’s property rights.’”

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